175 In April 1844, the French corvette Alcmène landed at Naha to
648 open up negotiations for trade with France. The local official protested to the French commander that the islands were sterile, provided only a little rice, had no gold, copper, or iron, and that from antiquity they had engaged in a modest trade in rice with the neighboring islands, if drought or floods did not interfere. He implored the French not to land because of the unhealthy climate. The French response was gracious, but a landing was made and a friendly interchange followed. This visit was the beginning of the French missionary effort in the Ryukyus.[20]

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175 Belcher's Narrative of the Voyage of H. M. S. Samarang (1848) describes some explorations in Okinawa, but his materials for this island are disappointing.

These earlier travellers generally concerned themselves with casual observations, as they came to the eye, on such subjects as marriage and burial customs, hairdress, religion, and clothing, but on the less colorful and more commonplace but just as important subjects as the family system, land tenure, and land use there is virtually no mention.

The Perry expedition, which first arrived at Okinawa and anchored at the port of Naha on May 26, 1853, made outstanding contributions.[21] The expedition explored large parts of the island. Previous observers had only touched the coasts or described the areas around Naha and Shuri and Unten. A series of technical papers on such subjects as agriculture, ethnology, and plant and animal life were prepared. Observations were made of court, town, and everyday village life. It is the last document, based on personal observations and exploration, and written from a modern point of view, which appeared before the Japanese formally took over the island and introduced the changes in the last two decades of the century that were to affect the daily life both of the villages and towns and alter the culture fundamentally.

[199]

The land explorations of the Perry expedition, as far as can be determined from the various place names and landmarks which in the account can be identified, included the south, the central, and parts bordering on the northern district of Kunigami. The exploration started from the home of the unhappy Dr. Bettelheim, a converted Jew and the resident missionary in Naha. Bettelheim told the members of the party what he knew of the language, Okinawan knowledge of arms and of money, and of their religion. From Naha, the explorers went to Tumai, subsequent

[Text Continues Top of P. 39 -- Analyst]

20 Cordier, Henri. Les français aux iles Liéou K'iéou. Mélanges d'histoire et de géographie orientales. Tome 1, 296-317.

21 See Hawk's Narrative of the Expedition, especially Vol. I, chapters 7-9, 11, and 17, and Vol. II which contains the specialised articles on various aspects of the exploration. See table of contents for the Loochoo articles.

Young girls with pots of hot tea circulated in the audience. The stage performance was a combination of local amateur talent and professionals from Naha. Normally the entertainment begins with a traditional Okinawan dance by a professional woman dancer, followed by a short skit. Conversations in Okinawan between an educated man and a stupid rustic are favorite subjects. Acts of this type are greatly enjoyed and cause laughter, mainly I was told because the jokes had sexual overtones. The shorter acts are followed by a play. (The theme of this play will be discussed in the following chapter).

6

Other Holidays of the Year

Chrysanthemum day, the ninth day of the ninth month (October 9, 1951), is a very minor holiday. A chrysanthemum is put in sake, and the flask is placed on the god shelf. A leaf of the plant is put in the sake when it is drunk. People at this time wish one another good health. The festival is only spottily observed.

There is a minor public holiday, the rice cake festival (mochi no matsuri), said to be native to Okinawa, on the 8th day of the 12th lunar month (January 4, 1952). On the day before, women prepare red and white cylindrical rice cakes, about 4 inches long and one inch in diameter. These are wrapped in the leaf of the sannin plant or in the leaves of sugar cane. The glutinous rice cake is made by first soaking rice in water and then mashing it in a hand mill. The rice is put in a cloth bag to allow excess water to drip out. The following morning the rice is boiled and shaped and wrapped in the leaves. The cake is doughy and insipid to taste. On the morning of the 8th, the cakes are placed on the god shelf and after prayers the cakes are removed. They are served during the day to guests. Sometimes children attach strings to these cakes and hang them about the room. The holiday is not observed by every family in the village, but it was recognised in all the villages studied.

The festival of the winter solstice, the longest night of the year (tōji) is known, but Hinatogawa was the only place in which its observance was noted. It is a home festival with prayers and the familiar offering of assorted foods to the ancestors.

Western Christmas is not observed in any of the villages. It would not be surprising if it should become a holiday, with gift giving, feasting, and drinking, but without the religious connotations. Since the occupation, Okinawans have become conscious of Christmas.[6]

6 I was told that in certain villages of the northern district, such as Kushi and Higashi near Ogimi that there is a Christmas festival, without the gift exchange, a survival of earlier missionary teaching. Time did not permit me to verify this, but there seems little doubt that a Christmas festival does exist in some Okinawan villages, judging by the frequency with which I heard of it in Matsuda and Ginoza villages.

Buddhism, as an organized religion, is of no importance, even though most villagers say they are Buddhists. Buddhist symbols and practices inspired by Buddhism remain, but that is a different matter. The universal use of the Buddhist god shelf or household altar, the observance of Buddhist holidays, such as higan, are matters more of custom and tradition than of religious fervor. This is significant because the Okinawans, for almost 70 years, were a part of the Japanese homeland, the greatest Buddhist nation on earth. During my stay in Okinawa, I thought that the recent war had caused the decline in Buddhist influence. This is only partly true. Subsequent reading of the older literature made it clear that in modern times, Buddhism has not been a living force. The ethical and political systems were primarily Confucian. The priestesses had a greater influence on daily life and at death ceremonials, at least in rural Okinawa.

A variety of practices concerned with the worship of natural phenomena, such as the summits of mountains, groves of trees, wells and springs and the sea survive, but they are not strong.

There is little evidence of Shinto beliefs, except in a few families who were long resident in Japan. Shrine Shinto, closely tied in with emperor worship, has been abolished.

Villagers are acquainted with Christianity, but I encountered no adherents. The name of the 19th century missionary, Dr. Bettelheim, is still remembered by people in Hinatogawa and Hanashiro. Dr. Bettelheim, a Jewish convert to Christianity, came to Okinawa in 1846. He was both ineffective and unhappy, but his ineffectiveness was probably due more to the lack of enthusiasm of the Okinawan rulers than to personal inadequacy.

3

Buddhism

Buddhist formalisms and home observances exist in all the villages. But the religion is not practiced. The people do not attend services or temples, nor do they support or seek out priests. This present situation is apparently little changed from the recent past. Captain Basil Hall (1816) mentioned the apparent low status of the bonse. Charles Wahs, on Perry's staff, said that, "The people, however, appear to be indifferent to it, and do not seem to have much veneration for it. Basil Hall Chamberlain wrote in 1893 that Buddhist influence was almost extinct. In 1910, Sison spoke of the weakness of Buddhism and that priests often did not participate in funerals. Goldschmidt in 1927 made similar observations.[1]

1 Hall, as cited, 98-99; Hawks, Perry's expedition to Japan, II, 49. Chamberlain, On the manners and customs of the Loochooans, In: Trans. of the Asiatic society of Japan, 21 (1893), 274. Sison, Beitrage zur Kenntnis der Riukiu-Inseln, 103-04, 177. Goldschmidt, Neu-Japan, 145.

The only Buddhist priest in the areas studied was at the small village of Maegawa, within walking distance of Hinatogawa and Hanashiro. He was a priest of the Jōdo sect (Jōdoshu), one of the important sects of Japan, and stressing salvation by faith. The sect of the priest in this village is of no importance, since the rural people now or before the war had neither the interest nor the capacity for doctrinal distinctions. The temples of this sect were burned during the war, including one in the village of Kochinda, a junction point between Naha and Gushichan.

Before the war the colors of the robes varied with the sect and with the position of the priest in the hierarchy. In the Jōdo sect, the lowest grade wore black, followed up the scale by orange, blue or green, a chocolate reddish brown, and purple, the highest. This contrasts sharply with the priest's present improvisations. His is the black robe of the Shinshu sect. It is a summer garment, made of soft light silk called shiya and resembles a man's kimono, but is longer and sweeps the floor. The garment hangs straight down and is not gathered or tucked. The only other religious possessions were a bell and a badly soiled print of the Buddha (oshaku) which hung in his room.

Before the war, some people in the Gushichan area requested the services of a priest at funerals. After the war, the people of Hanashiro, and other villages as well, decided because of the expense, to forego the services of a priest.

Occasionally this priest officiates when the bones in the temporary tombs of Hinatogawa are moved to the extended family tomb at Itoman, or in a ceremony honoring a death anniversary. Few Okinawans became priests. This priest is a native of Japan, one of the few remaining Japanese priests in the island. At eleven, he entered a Buddhist temple (tera) and has been engaged in religious activity ever since. Now about 50, he has a wife and two children; his head is unshaved and the hair is of a conventional cut. He does not depend on the priesthood for a living, but is employed as an official in a village office.

The situation with regard to Buddhism was quite similar in Matsuda, although there is no priest in the vicinity. There is little doubt, if the villages studied are typical, that this already moribund religion is disappearing altogether here, choked off by lack of temples, lack of priests, and by indifference.

It is not so with household Buddhism, if this term may be used to describe ceremonies and beliefs centering around the Buddhist god shelf or family altar (butsudan). This household altar is in the second room of every home. Around it collect the sentimental memories of the past, such as family pictures, photographs of young soldiers and dearly loved relatives. Prayers and offerings of food and drink to the dead are made before it.

An important part of the Buddhist altar is a frame holding the memorial tablets for the family dead. These tablets (ihai) are pieces